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At the Cherrywood Café

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Masters of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts
Creative Writing

By

Samantha Isasi
B.A. Eckerd College, 2001

December 2006

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“William’s Confession”, “The Leaving”, and “Highway 10” in Sulphur River Literary Review, Vol. XXIII 2005.

“Love on a Barstool”, “Last Night’s Women”, and “Bob’s Advice” in Main Street Rag, Winter 2005.

“Auden at Twenty” in The Long Island Quarterly, Summer 2005.

“The Scar” in The Pebble Lake Review, Winter 2005.

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Preface

A girl walks into a bar.

A girl walked into a bar.

She walked into that bar and sat in the darkest corner.

She ordered a drink. “And make it strong, sweetheart,” she said.

Her voice did not match her words. She was still only a girl.

A girl walked into a bar.

The bar was the Cherrywood Café.

“Madame Sosostriis, famous clairvoyant, had a bad cold,” said the man sitting next to her.

A girl walked into the Cherrywood Café and sat down. She sat down and turned to the man next to her. “That’s T.S. Eliot,” she said to the man next to her.

“I love that poem,” she said.

“Fear death by water,” said the man next to her.

He yelled it; “Fear death by water.”

A girl walked into a bar. She wanted to talk about poetry, to seem knowledgeable.

The bartender looked in their direction. The bartender looked in their direction and said, “No one wants to hear you babble on, that damn poem. Shut up.”

The man looked at her and whispered, “Fear death by water.”

“I’ve read that poem,” she said. “Can I buy you a drink?”

“Nothing’s free,” he said.

She motioned to the bartender. “One for him, please.”

She said, “Free verse is free.”

The bartender set a drink on the bar for him. The man sitting next to her touched the rim of the glass. He said, “Free verse is only free of meter.”

He touched the rim of the glass and said,

“I do not find the hanged man.”

“How can free verse be free of only meter?” she asked,
trying to ask a clever question.

She was trying to ask a clever question but the old man sitting next to her did not find it clever.

“Rules are imposed internally,” he said. “The rules come from the poet and the verse.”

“Poetry has laws,” he said, “just like everything else. What can be done with those laws...”

A girl walked into a bar and wanted to talk about poetry with the old man.

He was excited and waved his arm. He waved his arm, knocking over his drink.

“Think of sound,” he said, “think of repetition. Of form. Of communication. Of image. Of meter. Everything matters in poetry. Everything matters in free verse.”

“Look at the break of a line,” he said. “Look at the way a line breaks in a poem and there will be a reason. Look at it and you will know what that reason is. All free verse poets find themselves better poets by practicing writing poems in form. You must abide by the laws before you can escape them.”

He said, "Everything matters in free verse. How can you break any law without first acknowledging its existence?"

"Nothing is free," he said. "How about another drink?"

"Fear death by water," he said.

The girl was wiping off her wet arm with a few bar napkins. The bartender gave the girl more napkins and another round.

She asked, "Why *The Waste Land*?"

She asked him and he said. "Belladonna. The lady of the rocks. The lady of situations."

He called her Belladonna. "What is poetry to you, Belladonna?" He said.

"I don't know how to define poetry," she said.

Trying to be honest, she said, "I don't know what poetry is."

"Could it be communication? Could it be an evaluation of the universe? Could it be a summary of the world?" He asked.

He asked, "Could it be?"

He touched the rim of his glass.

The girl had walked into a bar and sat in the darkest corner.

“Look at Adrienne Rich’s ‘Terza Rima’,” said the man sitting next to her.

He said, “Look at how the form is not followed. Look at how idea of the form relates to the ideas in the poem. Look at that poem and realize that poetry encompasses so much that it is only definable in certain aspects. It is as if they are traveling through this cyclical experience that cannot be contained in any other manner.”

He said, “Look at that poem.”

He asked, “Do you know that poem?”

He touched the rim of his glass. She looked at him and shook her head.

She shook her head and he said, “Do you know the myth of Orpheus?”

This time she nodded.

She nodded so he said, “Imagine poetry as Eurydice. Imagine Orpheus. You have known Eurydice. You can know what she is but you cannot touch her. Orpheus could only keep his love by keeping faith that she was behind him. He could not hold her to make sure she was there while they ascended from Hades. Orpheus needed faith in what he could not grasp. That is what love and poetry have in common. You must have faith in them or they may disappear. When Orpheus turned around, he lost his faith.”

He added, “Some things were not meant to be defined. Some things were meant to be understood in a different way.”

“Madame Sosostriis, famous clairvoyant, had a bad cold,” he said.

A girl walked into a bar.

The old man called her Belladonna.

The old man called her the lady of situations.

He was calm now.

He said, “There is no escaping the laws.”

He said, “The laws are everywhere.”

The girl took a sip of her drink.

The man sitting next to her was just watching her now.

“Fear death by water,” he said.

“Fear waking next to Orpheus,” she said.

She had wanted to talk about poetry.

“I don’t think that you understand,” he said. “My Belladonna, my dear, pay attention.”

He said, "Pay attention."

She said, "Isn't all poetry subjective? Isn't all art subjective? Can't you be wrong about everything?"

The old man nodded. He touched the rim of his glass.

"No ideas but in things," he said.

"That's William Carlos Williams," she said.

The bartender set another round of drinks in front of them. She put her finger to the rim of her glass to wipe away a smudge of lipstick still clinging to it.

Bob's Advice

Now you are staring into your drink
as if you could find some answers imprinted
at the bottom of that glass.
I've seen this all before.
You've wandered in here
because it's dark and bleak, maybe it seems romantic.
That's your first mistake.
Do you want my advice?
Finish your drink
and wander home
before you need a twelve-step program
to help you remember your name.
I would hate to have to welcome you
to the real Cherrywood Café.

William's Confession

They had been there for days
waiting for a mouth to take them in,
that pair of overripe plums
almost frozen in the icebox,
their yellow flesh close to crystallizing.
I'm sure you were disappointed
at breakfast—still smug in your bathrobe
after last night's argument and finding my note
where your plums should have been
from where I had taken them
and with the flex of an arm
had pitched one, then the other into the dark yard.

These two red plums, my love, falling.
When the second one hit I was ready
to confess another sort of disposal
into a poem, so you would be too charmed to question
the midnight creaking of the back door or the dirt
still fresh on my bare feet.

On an August Balcony

My dog, under your chair, snored in her sleep.
I sat next to a cup of coffee
leaning a little, resting my feet

in your lap. On the balcony
we sipped slowly and I paged
through anthologies to read you poetry.

That August even the air had shades
of sweat, dripping through the stiff
days. I breathed through Yeats,

read Auden, Thomas, Frost, the cliff
notes of the greats, the words
pouring through me, tiny fists

of rain that collected verbs,
nouns, adjectives, descriptions carefully
wound into a way to serve

the knowledge of a different beauty.

The Leaving

Somewhere a dog is barking,
but on my street all is silent now.
We stand under the calm dark of the night sky.
I have told you to go, and you are.
You pause for a moment at the gate, before jingling
the keys in your hand, before getting into your truck.
No use in throwing dishes or more
accusations. The dirt grinds into the soles
of my feet, the cold air chills me
toward some edge of clarity. I put my hand
on the metal gate; the spoke of it digs
a cavern into the tip of my index finger.

Drinking during the daytime

is better than drinking at night;
you don't have to worry about
bumping into someone's
cigarette. I nod at the woman next to me,
the afternoon mood mellow.
She wants to talk about poetry,
but I'm thinking about Willie Nelson
and she doesn't know the words
to any songs I play on the jukebox.
Bob grunts when I ask him to turn up the volume
and pours another one for the girl who has been
twisting her hair into knots for an hour or so.
Blue eyes cryin', but her eyes are brown and so are mine,
and no one's crying, so I buy her another drink,
one for me also; we toast Willie Nelson and T.S. Eliot
and the poets of the everyday and the ones she wants to talk about,
but first I sing her the parts
of the song that she doesn't remember.

Auden at Twenty

The boys in Berlin were better.
You walked the streets looking for a lover
to bruise like fruit,
to watch the angles bleed.
Wrote later, it was not love.
Moving with the rhythm of touch
it was easy to let the phone ring after,
to listen to its echo down the halls of your rented rooms.

So different from the child at Gresham.
Ranting --
a poet.
A snob,
weeding through the reasons of poetry,
you flew your poems like paper planes
over the small nearby lake,
and rescued them the next night
by torchlight, hopeful again
of the strength of your own words.
You let them dry for days, hung over
the backs of chairs, near windows.

How could you know
love would be like this?

Dog of the Divorce

I remove the splinter from her front paw with sharp tweezers.
The small stake is curved and crooked.
We share custody of the hurt. Later I will feed her pieces
of bacon and she will favor her right side.

There is no blame. She looks at me with a steady gaze.
I run my hand down her length. We lie in bed, flipping through
the T.V. channels. Is there anything else I can do for you?
The dog does not have any answers for me.

What if I should be more worried? There is nothing
to do; it is almost midnight. My ex is somewhere across town,
unaware. We used to lie here together, the dog stretched across our legs.
If I called him now, we would just argue. It's not his day to care.

Here next to me the dog breathes a steady ache.
We lie in a blue T.V. haze, surreal light,
that reminds me of paintings, of the people who loved
Gertrude Stein. She leans her head against my knee, silent in the glare.

After a Portrait of Diego Rivera by Frida Kahlo

He could have been any man
sitting for a portrait, trying to be still
tapping his fingers against his knee
while you considered the best blend of pink
to match his tight smile, the brown to mimic the
seven small moles strung across both cheeks,
the eyes so dark the pupils barely show through.
Diego, your love, is leaning against a gray wall,
eyes focused on something far.

Ode to an Antidepressant

No thunder, no warning
rang from the air,
only the sky calm as water.
An unremarkable anxiety has poured in
through these halls lined with handprints and lead paint.
After the soft click of a shut door,
I am told to take one pale pill
every morning to stay the same as the sane day before,
to keep happiness coloring my skin. I am told poets
are meant to be drunk
with words, with sadness. But I do not want to
observe the lie that obsession
can make art more meaningful.
There is nothing beautiful
about this.

Love on a Barstool

There are worse parts of town to drown in.
At least here, I don't have to pretend to be happy,
and Bob, the barman, will always slip me a few for free.
He knows how it is, understands a broken heart,
the calm that comes at the end of a glass of bottom-shelf bourbon.
I breathe in the boozy residue of last night's warm bodies
and leaning laughter. Yesterday's women left cherry lip prints
on the rims of the glasses, and today I wipe the faded kisses
with my thumb, breathe in the thought of their perfume,
and signal for another drink. No use in pretending
being here is any better than being anywhere else.

Poem at Midnight

The night was full of nothing—
only the smell of dirt, and jasmine
hanging from the trees
to remind me I stopped someplace,
his touch just circumstance,
small as a cherry stone and as light,
almost capable of leaving behind a stain of fingerprints.
I expected to see a red blush on my arm
when his fingers lifted, one at a time
as if in a tentative, miniature salute.
His touch was nothing like the night.

The Artichoke

I did not imagine it
would look so much like
a flower, delicate and

pale, laid at the bottom of
the stovetop steamer,
scattered dark green streaks cut through

pale circle of leaves still left
from the blossom, the
heart that I've left sitting all

afternoon. I dip fingers
into the softened
leaves, this mimic of flora,

half-drowned lily or something
O'Keefe should have thought
to paint, something that could be

found somewhere in a book that
delegates species
and genus, instead of how

to steam, to wither the stemmed
green. Beauty, always,
blossoms unexpectedly.

For Li Po

You died the way a poet should,
reaching for the reflection of the moon,
that glow that wavered with each touch, the image
grasped so clearly to the dark lake water it looked real.
You fell through, loving the universe too much to stay solid,
becoming the wind's breath dancing over lute strings,
the somber space between friends parting again,
the kiss that seals the letter saying, if you are passing nearby,
I will come to meet you as far as Cho-fu-sa.
When it is too late, one realizes there is silence
where the birds once sang and think about you.

Last Night's Women

were a little drunk, dressed up,
with their tits out and their hips nudging some almost
attractive man with promises they might
fulfill after another round and the right small talk to fit
a future they'd decided is the one that looks right.
They believe romance still exists,
under the veil of something fifty proof with someone new,
wedding rings dropped into shallow pockets, no talk about
the everyday. This is the place where it is okay to binge
on the idea that something good will happen, that someone
sitting on one of the cigarette scarred barstools could be the Romeo
who will make breakfast in bed, who will walk the dog
and shovel the snow from the driveway
without even being asked.

Waking Next to Orpheus

Asleep you are beautiful and far,
someone else's name tattooed on your arm,
a subtitle for your face, a strange scar.
Asleep you are beautiful and far.
I gaze across the rumpled sheets, our
bed an ocean. I have drowned in your charm.
Asleep you are beautiful and far,
Someone else's name tattooed on your arm.

Abandoned Torso, New Orleans

Call her Venus, Mary, Agnes, Esther,
the carved wooden torso,
a woman caked with the strange luster,

the remnants of a February rain, coarse
where it does not show, her back
pressed into the roughness of the afternoon, the forced

sensuality of curves, breasts, cracked
open arms—as if she werewaiting
forever to hold the rain, lying abandoned in the black

yard, leaned against a rotting tree, still reaching, as if aching
for some kindness in the air, as if there were some
purpose in reaching upward and what is missing

would come back if only welcomed.

For Number Nine

Mongrel, instant fixture, I never wanted you.
Stray cat that I cursed and named Number Nine
because you wandered through my kitchen window
about that many times before I conceded.
The dog would follow your path through my rooms
whimpering and wagging her tail, hoping you would love her
while I eyed you from a careful distance.
Number Nine, you multi-colored genius, I tried
to give you away. Now you are gone,
and I catch myself listening for your soft purr
while the dog whimpers at the curtains, waiting for you
to end this endless game of hide and seek, wagging her tail.

City Pastoral

Smoking one last cigarette
near two-thirty a.m.,
I can exhale halos to crown
any insect into an angel.
On this city street, nature
breaks around the porch light's stiff hum.
I breathe gray air into a dark morning,
into an hour when even the cars
seem content, tucked
into the night under
spots of scribbled dew.

Santa Fe Poetry Reading

I sit at the back,
tapping my fingers to the rhythm
of someone else's words,
nodding when a line flows just right
and hits me so deeply
that I want to repeat it,
roll it around silently
in my mouth,
want to have said it first.

I met Jose at the supermarket.
I was in line to buy film...

Voices beat staccato drums.
Pauses are lifted from paper.
Standing behind a podium,
even the nervousness becomes poetry.

... and I told him, "I have not seen tumbled weed
before today."

The Blue Sweatshirt

Traveled to Tijuana, to San Antonio,
to New York. Traveled on trains,
cars, airplanes, draped on the backs
of chairs, floated to the bottom of your closet,
rubbed against the bottom of your nose,
the corner of my eye, slid across banisters,
and was found in the dumpster behind the A&P
three days before they found you.

Highway 10

During rush hour traffic
on highway 10 I see
what Rubens must have understood:
this streak of sun breaking through clouds
highlighting the distance;
this light and how it settles
across the blue lake of sky;
this sharp slice of clarity I hinge my sight on
while I tap the steering wheel
and inch closer to home.

What they are Given

Save the hands, they mean nothing
to what they've touched,
(Absorbing stiffness and texture, they do remember
the fabric of a lovers skin over many July nights,
sharp imprints of new grass leaned on too long,
flutter of fireflies in between cupped fingers, like eyelashes,
long neck of a beer bottle, slick with perspiration,
sweaty pen, the scrape of paper as the hand travels over it)
the pores, a thousand mouths,
kissing but only kissed back in handshakes,
the clasp and then empty return to where they had just been.

Mrs. Sosostris Decides to Intervene

Call me the Queen of Cups,
the woman of the Cherrywood Café;
I've been here longer than any barman or drunk,
have watched scenes play out like a piano's anxious jazz,
know-it-all, fortune teller from experience.
I've not been surprised in a long time
by what type of trouble clouds each barstool.
I know what no one wants to admit,
know Bob, standing behind the bar
as if he knew something other
than how to pour a drink,
leaning towards a woman, young and new,
her fingers wrapped around a lock
of her curly hair. I get up from behind
the bar's bills, spread on the table like tarot cards,
to go sit next to the girl who is now chewing on her straw
and looking at Bob as though he could give her
the empty universe.

On Burgundy Street

the smell of peaches haunts my room, pale, almost pink perfume, round globe, a sudden scent; dark, almost midnight, the deep world falling into spring, the windows wide for the first time in weeks, as I watch the shadows the epileptic streetlight casts through the window, a wandering reflection on my wall like a flailing fire trying to motion itself into something bigger. One day somewhere in the summer you and I were sitting side by side talking about poetry, your nose hunched into your knees while you breathed focused breaths, thinking, closing your eyes; when you opened them you told me your knees smelled like peaches, different from the rest of your body, which smelled of sunlight somehow, if sunlight could be pinned down to scent. Now nowhere near the park where you covered your toes each time the geese snooped by, convinced they might try to eat part of your feet, when it was really your knees that smelled like fresh delicate fruit, the same supple scent moves through my bedroom tonight despite the absence of peaches anywhere near.

The House Fire

 caught the attention of the whole neighborhood.
Her body inside the house
burning like a crooked candle.

The neighbors gather in their thin nightclothes,
leaning, wishing they could see
her body so they could understand
so later they could describe
with some authority the way she burned, like a tide,
her body separated by heat,
her body a snapped shoelace,
her body a string-less violin,
a canvas peeled back from its paint,
now only a subject of discussion
and she no longer anything.

Scar

Slowly we agree to the end of us.
We grasp at words to make the other okay.
Today is bound together like a scar,
thick tissue pinched into itself to protect
slim strands of skin laid over and over each other;
a reply to panic. The cavity of chest holds
the only rhythm in this room, pushing us still
into function. You touch my arm for maybe
the last time; my skin catches against your fingers
and I can feel all of the rhythms of my body,
almost out the door already.

Ladies Drink Free

Thursday's until ten,
and boys, you know what that means;
you'll look better under that drunken light,
able to move through the smoke-blurred air
with extra confidence, and find true love
for a few hours at least, and really who wants more?
So skip the brighter bars, the noisy nightclubs,
the rituals of flowers and romance.
It's Thursday, ladies drink free,
and you know what that means.

Vita

Samantha Isasi was raised in New York. She was lucky to spend her high school years reading poetry and taking workshops with some of the poets in Long Island. She received her B.A. from Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, Florida in 2001. Samantha moved to New Orleans to work towards her M.F.A at the University of New Orleans a year later. She now lives with a dog, a cat, and a man in a small Florida town where she writes poems while trying to figure out where she is going next.